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SUBJECT: RETHINKING OUR APPROACH TO CAMEROON

REF: A. YAOUNDE 724

[B.](#) YAOUNDE 769

Classified By: Ambassador Janet E. Garvey for reasons 1.4 (d) and (e)

¶1. (C) Summary: Cameroonian President Paul Biya, who recently celebrated his 27th year in office, has delivered little in the way of democratization, good governance, economic reforms, or investments in people - all key USG goals. The government here values its relationship with the United States but has not moved substantially in areas that we care about, with the exception of cooperation on maritime security. As it heads into a critical pre-election period, Cameroon has a number of the ingredients of a failing state, with the potential for conflict that could undermine regional stability. This calls for an adjustment in our approach, building on existing tools and Mission Strategic goals but leaning more on Washington engagement, cooperation with the French and other allies, and a sharper-edged message. Our primary goal should be to encourage preparations for a peaceful transition to a more democratic, better governed post-Biya period. End summary.

Biya Completes 27 Years

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¶2. (C) On November 6, Paul Biya celebrated 27 years as President of Cameroon; when added to his time as former President Ahidjo's Prime Minister, Biya has been at the helm of government for 32 years (since 1977). As detailed ref A, Cameroon has a number of the elements of a failing state and Biya had little to trumpet at last week's anniversary. He marked the occasion with a first-ever letter to the Cameroonian people in which he extolled Cameroonians to feel better about themselves but talked only in general terms about his goals (septel).

¶3. (C) Biya's 27th year in office was not without some accomplishments. Cameroonian officials frequently argue that the country's ethnic, linguistic, and regional divisions require slow movement on many fronts; they highlight stability and unity as among Biya's biggest achievements. 2009 was a more stable year than riot-torn 2008. Relations with Nigeria are at a high and Biya is beginning to play a more statesmanlike role in the Central African region. There is more security in Bakassi, thanks largely to the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR). Biya urged his Cabinet to fight inertia and, in a minor Cabinet shuffle in June, he changed his Prime Minister and ousted his venal Defense Minister. Since then, the government seems more focused on moving forward with large infrastructure projects, including several new roads and the Kribi port. Biya has also continued with his anti-corruption campaign "Operation Epervier (Operation Sparrowhawk), arresting a string of officials on corruption charges.

¶4. (C) On the other hand, Biya enters his 28th year with

diminished legitimacy. His recent letter to the people and an orchestrated campaign drumbeat from within the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM) party are strong signals that Biya will run again in the scheduled 2011 presidential election. Biya seems increasingly isolated and has fended off criticism of the fact that he spends significant time overseas, including on expensive vacations. His 2008 decision to pack the new Electoral Commission (ELECAM) with senior party stalwarts undermined democratic development and raises a big question mark about the legitimacy of the upcoming election. Economic forecasts continue to be gloomy, with GDP growth predictions for 2009 of about 2% (below 3% population growth), although senior officials hope that a global economic pickup and new infrastructure investments will spur more buoyant growth by the third quarter of 2010. The government has made little progress on governance and its 2009 Millennium Challenge Corporation scorecard reads about the same as last year - that is to say, Cameroon fails on 13 of 17 MCC indicators.

#### The U.S. A Valued Partner

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**¶15. (C)** The United States celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations with Cameroon in 2007. Cameroonian's admire the U.S. and the government values its relationship with the United States, especially our military-military cooperation, and sees us as a counterbalance to France and China. President Biya met President Bush at the White House in 2003 and supported us on the Iraq war when Cameroon was a Security Council member. The GRC greatly appreciates our support for the Greentree process which led to the handover of the

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Bakassi Peninsula from Nigeria - perhaps Biya's biggest perceived success in recent years.

**¶16. (SBU)** Over the past month, the Foreign Ministry has stepped up overtures to us, seeking a regular bilateral dialogue and supporting us with an abstention in the Goldstone Report. The Director for North America at the Foreign Ministry recently reassured Pol/Econ Chief that "You are one of our top partners - if you don't know it, you should." The GRC has repeatedly hinted at a desire for senior USG visitors (top of their wish list, not surprisingly, is a POTUS visit).

#### Active Broad-Gauge Engagement

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**¶17. (SBU)** Our top Mission Strategic Plan priorities are: to strengthen democracy and good governance; to foster economic prosperity and development; to collaborate on security and international issues; and to invest in people. Within these goals, our main activities are:

-- Democracy Building: We deploy a wide range of activities to encourage democratic development, including a broad array of Public Diplomacy programs. We were the most outspoken foreign mission in opposing the 2008 constitutional change to eliminate presidential term limits and the subsequent creation of ELECAM. The Ambassador and her predecessor have been at the forefront of diplomats in speaking out against corruption and electoral fraud. In the past year, we sponsored a Human Rights Day roundtable and a series of democracy showcase events, and organized programs to highlight the 2008 U.S. presidential election. We engage the government actively on anti-corruption efforts, including helping identify overseas deposits of ill-gotten money.

-- Economic Advocacy: We regularly engage the government on investment climate and budget transparency issues. We actively support U.S. companies and EXIM Bank, OPIC, USDA, and the US Trade Development Agency, which are all engaged here. The U.S. is Cameroon's largest foreign investor (in terms of dollars) and one of its largest trading partners.

Cameroonian exports to the U.S. doubled between 2007 and 2008, to \$614 million.

-- Mil-Mil Engagement: One of the strongest components of our bilateral relationship is our military-military relationship. This includes various ongoing FMF cases valued at about \$1 million, humanitarian assistance, and increasingly strong engagement on maritime security, especially with the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR). For the past year, Cameroon has offered to deploy up to 800 troops for UN/AU peacekeeping mission in Darfur.

-- Investing in People: We have one of the largest and oldest Peace Corps programs in the world (currently with about 125 Volunteers), focused on education, health and small business development. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Cameroon has been active in countering HIV/AIDS. Other bilateral assistance totaling about \$30 million, in single and multi-year funds, includes the US Department of Agriculture's Food for Progress programs (focused on food security), and small funds to support refugees, democracy and human rights, Self Help projects, and environmental activities. USAID closed its office in Cameroon in 1994 (largely a reaction to the stolen 1992 election) but retains about \$1.5 million in programming here, primarily focused on the health sector, and managed out of its regional office in Accra. Public diplomacy is a major tool for the mission to promote development assistance and new partnerships.

#### What Have We Gotten For It?

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18. (C) We have had years of polite conversations with the GRC and attestations of friendship. In return, we have gotten a certain degree of cooperation on many fronts and a certain level of reciprocated good will. However, it is difficult to say we have substantially moved the ball on the things that matter most to us. Our public statements on elections, amending the constitution, corruption and ELECAM gained us popular support but did not visibly impact GRC decision-making. Biya has done little to open up his authoritarian regime or smooth the way for a post-Biya democratic transition. While the media has become freer in the past decade and there is a high level of religious freedom, Cameroon has never had a free and fair election, its democratic institutions (parliament, judiciary, electoral

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commission etc.) are politically controlled from the center, and opposition and civil society elements have been weakened and co-opted.

19. (SBU) Cameroon does poorly on scorecards from the World Bank, Freedom House, Transparency International and other organizations, with rankings steadily slipping. Its economy is limping along, with little industry, little agricultural diversification, and little economic vision. Many social indicators have worsened. Corruption is endemic and government decision-making is sclerotic. Cameroon has supported us on some UN and other international issues, but it tends to abstain on UN votes important to us, with a 22% voting coincidence with the United States on overall votes and 0% on important votes in 2008, according to the Department's "Voting Practices in the United Nations" report.

10. (C) As detailed in ref A, Cameroon's drift threatens its longer term stability and our national interests here - within Cameroon but also within the region. Cameroon's Douala port, road connections, oil refinery (which produces almost all of Cameroon and Chad's refined petroleum), \$4.5 billion Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline, abundant agricultural production, and large economy (the largest GDP in Central Africa) are critical to the economic health of its neighbors. As the longest serving leader in the region, Biya has some

influence over neighboring heads of state, although he has traditionally shied away from regional activism. We have a regional strategic interest in strengthening Cameroon's longer term stability - which requires us to adjust our engagement.

Our Seven-Point Approach

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**¶11. (C)** It is time, we believe, to be more direct with Biya and the GRC. We outline the following seven-point approach:

-- Get Senior Washington Engagement: We believe senior Washington engagement (preferably Assistant Secretary level or higher) with Biya and senior GRC officials could be productive. Such discussions should note our growing frustration with developments in Cameroon, highlighting the need to improve governance, ensure greater legitimacy for ELECAM, hold free and fair elections in 2011, and prepare for transition to a post-Biya period. We should tell the government privately that we can only support them as friendly partners up to a point -- we cannot sacrifice our support of fundamental U.S. principles in the process. We will tell them we want to be on the right side of history, and that increasingly, the current regime appears to be on the wrong side.

-- Engage with a Sharper Edge: We will seek renewed opportunities to highlight our Self Help programs, Peace Corps and other activities, framing them in terms of our support for the Cameroonian people. We will continue to put our mil-mil activities in the context of regional security and the interests of the Cameroonian people. At the same time, however, in line with senior Washington engagement, we will stress to the GRC privately and in public forums our desire to see the current paradigm in Cameroon change. We will explain to the GRC our internal tripwires, including tripwires we will develop for responding to political and security developments, and how the unfolding events of the next few years could impact our relationship. At the same time, we should continue to reinforce our message that Cameroonian need to take more responsibility for their own future.

-- Develop Political Tripwires: As noted above, we plan to map out a series of political and security tripwires to guide our more sharply focused engagement over the coming few years. Key markers will be whether ELECAM becomes a more credible electoral institution by mid-2010; whether the GRC publishes its 2005 census; whether the human rights and media freedom situations change significantly; whether there is progress in fighting corruption (including implementation of Article 66 of the constitution which requires government officials to disclose their personal assets); whether the security forces are deployed to suppress dissent; whether the President creates a Senate, as required by the constitution; and - looking down the road - whether the 2011 election is free and fair.

-- Work More Closely with Allies: The "8 6" group of like-minded Ambassadors is a useful forum for coordination on the ground. The outgoing European Union Ambassador this week

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publicly blasted Cameroon for its poor record on democracy and governance. We have sensed, however, a greater reluctance on the part of some partners like the British and Dutch - who have been outspoken and activist in the past - to hold Cameroon to a high standard of governance and speak out about problems. We will work to mobilize a more united multinational approach to Cameroon. Per ref B, France has considerable influence with the Biya regime but has been reluctant to criticize the regime. We would encourage an effort in Washington and Paris to convince France to cooperate with us more closely on anti-corruption and democracy promotion in a country like Cameroon, where

France's long term interests may be jeopardized by the animosity generated by closely aligning with a regime like Biya's.

-- Strengthen our Assistance Tools: Our assistance efforts are piecemeal and have little visibility. Post has put together an assistance matrix to better track the various pots of USG funding here but our ability to leverage these into influence is hampered by a systemic lack of coordination and staffing. A Foreign Ministry contact recently complained to Pol/Econ Chief "you never ask us what we want, you just offer us things." He has a point. Our overall assistance engagement process- from DOD, USDA, USAID, Peace Corps, Fish and Wildlife Service, and others - insufficiently consults post and the GRC on priorities and design. From post's vantage point, the MSP and F processes have not brought about this discipline, limiting our ability to use our resources, even in countries like Cameroon where the funding levels are modest. Part of the problem is staffing. We manage a large USDA program with no USDA staff. DAO manages sizable humanitarian assistance without adequate staff to track it. We have not seen the USAID regional model work well, especially since there is no USAID Central Africa.

-- Innovate On Other Tools: Post has used the 212 (f) visa ineligibility as a powerful way to impact efforts to combat corruption. We would welcome other visa tools - such as ineligibilities for electoral fraud and Internet scammers - to reinforce our core interests. We would also like to see new ideas on supporting AGOA. Cameroon is a major economy with some sophisticated exporters eager to take more advantage of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). Yet we seem to have the same discussions every year with the GRC and private sector about the country's inability to effectively take advantage of AGOA. We hope to establish a USAID-supported AGOA Resource Center in Cameroon and will look for ways this Center can engage creatively to boost AGOA. In other areas where we support and engage the GRC - such as health, agriculture, and security - we should focus our efforts on good governance. So much of progress in these areas depends on the governance component. We also see scope to get more demanding on GRC responsiveness to USG training opportunities. The USG offers free security training under ILEA and a range of military offerings, free US Patent and Trademark training, free training trips to strengthen fisheries and anti-corruption efforts, and other training options that support mutual goals. Yet we have great difficulty getting the GRC to provide the required clearances and names. We plan to demarche the government at senior levels about this difficulty in getting cooperation for training and then start denying training options that become too difficult to implement.

-- Add a Political Officer: For the past two MSPs, post has requested the return of a political officer position. This position remains key to our ability to effectively implement the above goals. An additional political officer would help our Pol/Econ section strengthen assistance coordination, engage more actively with allies, boost Public Diplomacy and interventions focused on democracy and good governance, better engage civil society and political parties, and increase reporting during the run-up to elections and an eventual post-Biya period.

Comment

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¶12. (C) We have a limited ability to impact developments in Cameroon. Biya is set in his ways after almost three decades as president. He and his entourage are polite listeners but are fundamentally conservative and preservationist. Nonetheless, the approach outlined above is, in our view, our best road map for impacting the critical next few years for Cameroon. Biya will listen to us more if Washington engages (through phone calls, meetings, visits etc.) at a senior level, especially if in tandem with France. He wants international legitimacy, especially from our two countries.

A more bold and at times confrontational style could undermine GRC good will to some degree. However, Cameroonians have become used to our forward leaning, at times outspoken, diplomacy and will adjust to a tougher approach on some issues which, if carefully managed, will better serve our interests here.

GARVEY